

Internationalist Theatre's (initially known as New Internationalist Theatre) production of Brecht's `Mother Courage and Her Children ` , at Theatre Space , London May 1982, was notable not only for the high praise it earned from top London drama critics like Christopher Hudson of the `Evening Standard`, Brecht specialist Peter Hepple of `The Stage` and Tom Vaughan of ` The Morning Star` , for its production values , powerful central performance from Margaret Robertson as Mother Courage, fine detailed directing from Peter Stevenson (fresh from co-direct in RSC with John Barton):

Christopher Hudson , Tuesday , May 6th, 1982, `Letting Mother take the load`

The achievement of staging one of the most difficult dramas and greatest epic plays in the restricted space of an underground basement of the old London Charing Cross hospital and holding the audience `s attention for three hours is described by Hudson :

- 1) `Three hours of Brecht in a basement of an old Charing Cross hospital might sound like noble endurance indeed. But the Internationalist Theatre`s production of Mother Courage at the Theatre Space is not to be so lightly dismissed`
- 2) The actors allow this great play `to let it speak for itself , serious , straightforward , workmanlike performance...`
- 3) The production`s successful evocation of ` the humour and fatalism of the play come through strongly`
- 4) `Fortunate to have a Mother Courage (Margaret Robertson) who carries the production as stoutly as she carries her wagonload of supplies...
- 5) `Her great achievement is to keep our sympathy as well as our attention`
- 6) ` Peter Stevenson directs with a good eye for the telling detail- Mother Courage giving money for Katrin`s burial and instinctively taking one coin back`
- 7) See attached scan of Hudson`s review following the written text ;

Peter Hepple of The Stage, May 13 , 1982 and a specialist on Brecht:

- 1) Importance and achievement of New Internationalist to stage ` Mother Courage ` first time it has been seen in London for 15 years, and despite the lack of space,
- 2) director , Peter Stevenson has achieved a significant piece of epic theatre with his multi-national cast`....` a consistently high level of performance..` Page 1-3

- 3) Praise for Margaret Robertson's Mother Courage : ` a portrayal of real power, conveys with looks , tone of voice and stance that this is a play about survival, the art of keeping alive...`
 - 4) In tackling the role of Mother Courage, one the greatest female parts in modern theatre ` the actress is up to it in almost every respect.....`
 - 5) See Attached scan Hepple's review following the written text;
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Tom Vaughan of ` The Morning Star ` May 6 , 1982, in his review also praises the success of this production in staging :

- 1) `the panorama of the Thirty Years` Warin the restricted ambience of this basement theatre without any feeling of confinement...`
 - 2) The effective simplicity of the staging: `Attempts to ape the Berliner Ensemble with placards or half- curtains are avoided.....brief announcements by the actors`
 - 3) Actors allow the text to speak for itself : ` The densely argued, emotionally explosive dialogue is allowed its full scope`
 - 4) Admirable quality of performance: ` There are deeply satisfying performances in all the main parts- especially Margaret Robertson's Courage, Milos Kirek's Cook, and Renu Setna's Chaplain. And every moment and movement of Josephine Welcome's Katrin is unforgettable...`
 - 5) See attached scan of Vaughan's review following the written text;
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This production of `Mother Courage ` in London`s Theatre Space not seen for 15 years presented by Internationalist Theatre(initially known as New Internationalist Theatre) is also notable for making history in London theatre for staging this play for the first time with a multi-racial and multi-national cast and how this casting contributed to enriching the performance of this great drama:

Richard Ingham Where to Go , May 13, 1982

`The cast, from New Internationalist Theatre , is made from experienced actors from all over the world, and perhaps their very cosmopolitanism helps to bring out new textures from a familiar dish`

See attached scan of Ingham's review following the written text

Multinational cast speaking in their native accents:

Margaret Robertson – American

Milos Kirek – Czechoslovakia

Renu Setna – Pakistani

Yves Aubert- French

Corinna Schnabel- German

Angelique Rockas- SA Greek

The Drama critic of Event Magazine, 13 May 1982, pointed out the timeliness of the performance of this play about war :

- 1) ` With the Falklands crisis and Women Live festivalsingularly appropriate to be presenting Brecht`s drama of war and feminine resilience...
 - 2) the enriching policy of multi-racial casting ` makes sense- emphasising the chancy meetings of a world caught up in conflict`
 - 3) See attached scan of Event Magazine`s review following the written text
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The ground breaking risks taken by Internationalist Theatre in casting actors with accents from various parts of the world in the London of 1982 , was not well received by every critic.

Malcolm Hay drama critic of Time Out Magazine , May 13 , 1982 was scathing about this policy:

` ..the casting only inspires a whole host of irreverent questions: what on earth, say, is an American sergeant doing in seventeenth century Europe? And how did a Pakistani chaplain get into the Swedish army?`

The question that was being posed by Internationalist Theatres casting was:

` In a production of Mother Courage with Caucasian only English actors , how did an English chaplain get into the Swedish army?`

Hay`s literalism was found offensive by the company and Ann McFerran the then Editor of Time Out drama section was requested to withdraw the review from further publication.

This casting policy started ripples of discomfort also among casting directors like the renowned Irene Lamb, who asked Joe Figg , a member of the cast `Why is she (Angelique Rockas founder of this company) doing this?`

Next pages contain the Scans of the original reviews referred to in pages 1-3 of the written text :

- 1) Scan of Christopher Hudson`s ` Evening Standard` review
- 2) Scan of Peter Hepple`s review in `The Stage`
- 3) Scan of Tom Vaughan`s review in ` The Morning Star
- 4) Scan of Richard Ingham`s review in ` Where to Go`
- 5) Scan of drama critic of `Event` Magazine`s review
- 6) Scan of extract from Malcolm Hay`s ` Time Out` magazine review

—THE STANDARD, THURSDAY, MAY 6, 1902

Letting Mother take the load

(1) THREE hours of Brecht in a basement of the old Charing Cross hospital might sound like noble endurance indeed. But the International Theatre's production of *Mother Courage at the Theatre Space* is not to be so lightly dismissed.

Like all great plays, *Mother Courage* readily responds to serious, straightforward, workmanlike performance by actors who are prepared to let it speak for itself.

(2) In this production of the humour and fatalism of the

play come through strongly and the tight circle in which *Mother Courage* has to drag her wagon of provisions somehow strengthens the sense of futility her wandering conveys.

(3) Inevitably, the strengths and weaknesses of this play are the strengths and weaknesses of its central performance. In *Mother Courage*, the company is fortunate to have a *Mother Courage* who carries the production as stoutly as she carries her wagonload of supplies.

Grinning defiantly and mak-

ing her sales pitch as though her life depended on it, she queens it over the soldiers and peasants as if to the manner born. Her great achievement is to keep our sympathy as well as our attention.

(4) She may be the mercenary profiteer, who haggles over her son's life; she is also the kind-hearted mother who softens her rasping tones when giving advice to Katrin her dumb daughter, and the susceptible woman whose eyes light up when the Commander's cook makes a pass.

Mother Courage is well supported by Milos Kirek's lowering, imperturbable cook, and by the chaplain, played by Renu Setna with an entertaining self-importance.

The music is unpleasantly harsh and discordant. But Peter Stevenson directs very capably with a good eye for the telling detail—*Mother Courage* giving money for Katrin's burial and instinctively taking one coin back

Christopher Hudson

Art of keeping alive

NEW INTERNATIONALIST Mother Courage

BECAUSE IT IS Brecht's most accessible and, for all his didacticism, most moving play, it is odd that "Mother Courage and her Children" is not staged more frequently. The New Internationalist production at Theatre Space is the first time it has been seen in London for 15 years, and despite the lack of space, director Peter Stevenson has achieved a significant piece of epic theatre with his multi-national cast.

The play presents considerable technical difficulties, not the least of which is that Mother Courage's cart has to be continually hauled around the stage, but they have been overcome with the assistance of designer Mick Bearish, whose setting is always suggestive of a never-ending battlefield, and there is a consistently high level of performance, even if the singing of the Brecht-Dessau songs leaves a little to be desired. In the title role there is a portrayal of real power, with all the necessary dogged determination, from Margaret Robertson, who conveys with looks,

tone of voice and stance that this is a play about survival, the art of keeping alive, looking after one's family, scraping a living, if necessary moving from place to place, while the politicians, generals and the religious leaders ignore the ordinary people.

Mother Courage is one of the greatest female parts in the modern theatre and the actress is up to it in almost every respect, suffering as her beloved children are taken from her one by one, refusing to be sidetracked by the proposals of the Chaplain and the Cook, winning a series of small victories over

soldiers and civilians alike but ending up with nothing.

Among the large cast there are strong performances from Milos Kirek as the Cook, Renu Setna as the Chaplain whose faith is in abeyance for the duration, Joe Figg in three roles, Stephen Tiller as Eilif and, in particular, from Josephine Welcome as the dumb Kattrin, acting mainly with her expressive eyes and suggesting silent agonies which only Mother Courage can understand.

Peter Hepple

Rising to Brecht's

Mother Courage and her Children. (Theatre Space, King William IV St.).

THIS production by the New Internationalist Theatre, directed by Peter Stevenson, is a more than adequate response to the demands of Brecht's most famous, most difficult, and greatest play.

(1) The panorama of the Thirty Years' War is played out in the restricted ambience of this basement theatre without any feel-

plays and players
by
tom vaughan

ing of confinement. Anna Fierling keeps her wagon moving and her business liquid as, one by one, the war by which she profits destroys her children.

(2) Attempts to ape the Berliner Ensemble with placards or half-curtains are avoided; where necessary we are kept in the historical picture by brief announcements by the actors.

(3) The densely argued, emotionally explosive dialogue is allowed its full scope.

(B) There are deeply satisfying performances in all the main parts — especially Margaret Robinson's Courage, Milos Kirek's Cook, and Renu Sitna's Chaplain. And every moment and movement of Josephine Welcome's Kattrin is unforgettable, rising to the highest demands of the great final drumming scene.

The use of music is again economical and effective; although no actor nor actress here would claim to be a great singer, they cope well with Paul Dessau's Lutheran singspiel:

"Christians awake, the winter's gone,

The snows depart, the dead sleep on . . ."

Worth seeing at Theatre Space: Mother Courage and Her Children, Brecht's earnest, if unwieldy, anti-war epic of a camp follower and her three fated offspring.

Margaret Robertson puts in a good performance as the battered mother who strives and fails to keep her children fed and safe from war. She has a suitably wiry frame, with a husky voice which endears itself to the impression of feisty maternalism, but does little to embellish Brecht's songs, rather tedious litanies to the horrors of fighting. The songs are intended, I suppose, to add to the fabled Verfremdungseffekt (literally, an 'alienation effect') designed to distract the audience from getting too wrapped up with the fate of the characters and to dwell more on the many intellectual issues raised.

Generally the play fits in well with Theatre Space's tiny stage, even if the immediacy of the final, swift-changing scenes is lessened by the venue's technical restrictions. The cast, from New Internationalist Theatre, is made from experienced actors from all over the world, and 'perhaps their very cosmopolitanism helps to bring out new textures from a familiar dish. The play runs until Sunday (see listing for details).

Richard Ingham

Where to Go

May 13

1982.

Theatrespace 48 William IV St.
WC2 (836 2035) Charing
Cross tube. To Sun at 7.30,
£2.25, plus 25p:

'Mother Courage' by Brecht,
presented by New
Internationalist Theatre (NIT)
*With the Falklands Crisis and
the Women Live festival on
us at the same time it's
singularly appropriate to be
presenting Brecht's drama of
war and feminine resilience.*
New Internationalist have a
policy of multi-racial casting
which for once makes sense
— emphasising the chancy
meetings of a world caught
up in conflict. The company
have chosen to use Paul
Dessau's original score which
taxes nearly all their
capabilities and results in
some raucous and tuneless
singing; except for the voice
of Milos Kirek as the Cook
which has the requisite
unselfconscious sure tone.

EVENT
Magazine
May 13,
1982.

'MOTHER COURAGE's' MULTI-RACIAL AND MULTI-NATIONAL CASTING MAKES HISTORY

Malcolm Hay drama critic for London's `Time Out` magazine (13th May 1982, page 10) was scathing about Internationalist Theatre `s (initially known as New Internationalist Theatre) multi-racial and multi-national casting policy in Brecht's Mother Courage` production directed by Peter Stevenson .

but the surrounding context is over easy, and ...
the casting only inspires a whole host of irreverent questions: what on earth, say, is an American sergeant doing in seventeenth century Europe? And how did a Pakistani chaplain get into the Swedish army? (Malcolm Hay)



